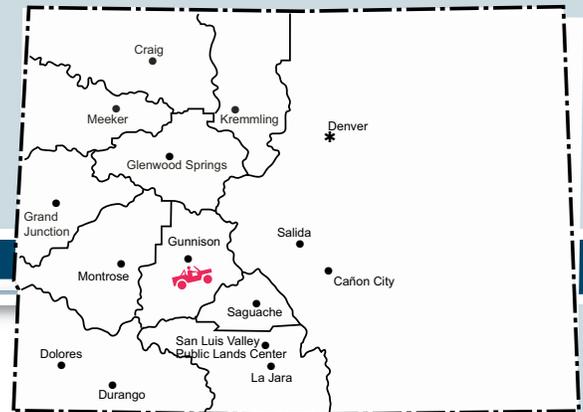


COLORADO

Gunnison Field Office



September 2006

A Trip through the Historic Mining Country of the Gunnison Field Office

By Dave Lazorchak



This month's road trip takes us to the Gunnison Field Office's historic mining districts located in Hinsdale County. Nearly 95 percent of this county is composed of public lands and national forests. In recognition of the centennial anniversary of the Antiquities Act of 1906, let's focus on the rich mining history of the region, which takes us to one of Colorado's more colorful old mining communities, Lake City. We'll be traveling from sagebrush hills to high above timberline. With the discovery of gold in the 1870s, this rough and rugged terrain became home to hard rock miners and prospectors looking to strike it rich. Our trip leaves from Gunnison and follows Colorado State Highway 149 at the upper end of Blue Mesa Reservoir heading south.

En route to Lake City, we come upon the historic mining town of Spencer, located along the Gunnison Gold Belt. The town reached its peak population in the late 1890s; unfortunately, the once promising gold deposits were soon mined out. A new life for Spencer occurred with the discovery of copper, which kept the town going until 1920. A one-room school house and its out-buildings, which were occupied from 1902 to 1946, are the only structures remaining in this once prosperous mining town. Through partnerships with the Colorado Historical Society, Gunnison County, the C.T. Hurst Chapter of the Colorado Archaeological Society and other volunteers, this structure has been saved from ruin for future generations to enjoy.



The Spencer schoolhouse after stabilization and partial reconstruction.



Motoring along the highway, we come across Sapinero Mesa. North of the highway is the Goose Creek Forest Health Improvement Project. This project involved stewardship contracting with the purpose of reducing hazardous fuels in our forests. Marketable trees are cut and sold to offset the costs of thinning the trees that have no market value. The overall benefit is a much healthier forest for the wildlife to use and the public to enjoy.

Traveling on, we reach the Lake Fork of the Gunnison River. The highway follows along the river where the railroad used to run. Not much remains of the old railway; segments of the grade and an occasional bridge abutment where the tracks crossed the river are all that visitors can still see. For recreationists, camping and fishing along the public lands and the private lands with fishing easements, offer a day or two in the great outdoors. We then arrive at Lake City, a registered Historic District that was nearly wiped out in the devastating fire of 1879. Many of the downtown buildings not destroyed in the fire have been restored thanks to the efforts of the Hinsdale County Historic Society and other concerned citizens. Lake City is also a starting point for the scenic Alpine Loop Back Country Byway, which contains a rich part of the mining history of the San Juan Mountains.



A healthy stand on Sapinero Mesa after reduction of hazardous fuels.

The northern part of the Loop takes visitors through the Galena Mining District, which follows Henson Creek and continues over Engineer Pass. Along this portion of the route is the Ute-Ulay Mine and Mill and Little Rome, a historic mining camp for Italian immigrants. It was here in 1899 that about 100 miners went on strike to protest horrible working conditions and unreasonable demands from the mining company. All those miners without families were forced to reside in the company's boarding houses and pay exorbitant rates. After the State Armory was broken into and rifles and ammunition were stolen, the Governor dispatched the National Guard to quell the riots, quickly ending the only major strike in the Galena District. Later in the strike settlement it was noted - quite illegally - that all Italians were to leave Hinsdale County. Remnants of mining operations such as prospects, adits, tunnels, shafts, and millsites, along with camps and towns from that rough and rugged time dot the landscape.

Five miles from Lake City is the Pike Snowden Cabin, a restored cabin that once belonged to one of the area's more colorful individuals. A few miles past the cabin is Capitol City, which was originally known as Galena City. In 1877, an ambitious entrepreneur named George Lee arrived at the 200-acre town site. He envisioned a great potential for Capitol City and invested a fortune in building another mill at the east end of town, a large two-story brick house (complete with the region's only brick outhouse), several saw and planing mills, a marble quarry, a rock factory and a lime kiln. Rose Lime Kiln, named after Lee's only daughter, converted locally mined limestone into lime, which was used in smelting, as a bonding agent in cement, for chinking on log cabins and in plaster for interior walls. Unfortunately, Lee's vision of a bustling and booming Capitol City and Lake City never came true. Lee left the area and headed to Denver after the regional depression of 1882 left him penniless.



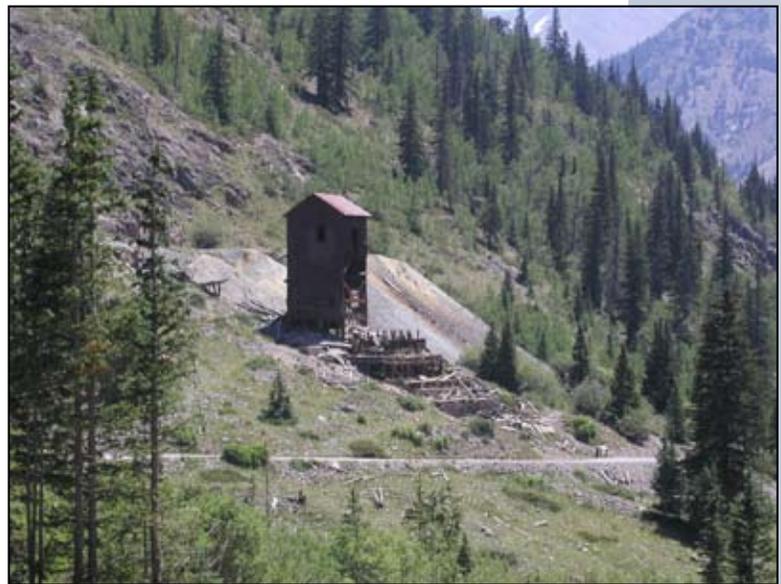
Heading toward Engineer Pass we come across the scene of “White Death.” On March 24, 1929, an avalanche struck at the Bonanza-Empire Chief Mill in which four people were killed. The avalanche completely buried a bunkhouse, the kitchen and the main office building. One of the unfortunate miners was found buried under twelve feet of hard packed snow. The Bonanza-Empire Chief Mill never recovered after the avalanche. Problems with debt, rising coal prices, transportation, legal battles, and the Great Depression forced the mine to close.



Capitol City post office, the last original structure after stabilization.

The mill was stabilized in 2000 in conjunction with other historic structures along the Alpine Loop. The work was funded in part, just as for so many other historic structures in the area, by grants from the Colorado Historical Society, Save America’s Treasures and the Federal Highway Administration’s National Scenic Byway Program. Additionally, the mill and all of the other historic preservation projects along the Alpine Loop would not have been possible without the efforts of Hinsdale County, the Hinsdale County Historical Society and countless volunteers who gave their time and expertise to help preserve America’s mining heritage.

Moving right along, we continue on toward timberline. Our next stop is the Golconda mine and boarding house, a large structure used for mining on and off until the early 1980s. Located above timberline in Horseshoe Basin, at the head of Schafer Gulch, it is a rough four-wheel drive trip to reach the Golconda mine and boarding house. A local hardrock and uranium miner recounts days gone by when he used to work the mine in the 1960s and 70s. He recalls the wind and afternoon storms that rolled over the mountains, the illegal still in the basement of the boarding house, and timbers in the mine’s portal and support workings cracking under the weight of rocks and ice. In the 1910s, the U.S. Geological Survey wrote about the precarious mine, which was located on a rock glacier.



The Bonanza-Empire Chief Mill.

Upon leaving Hurricane Basin, you will head up over Engineer Pass. You can continue down the Animas Forks to Silverton, or you can drive over Cinnamon Pass and head down to the Lake Fork of the Gunnison River — the choice is up to you, but we encourage you to explore this area and enjoy Colorado’s rich and historic past.

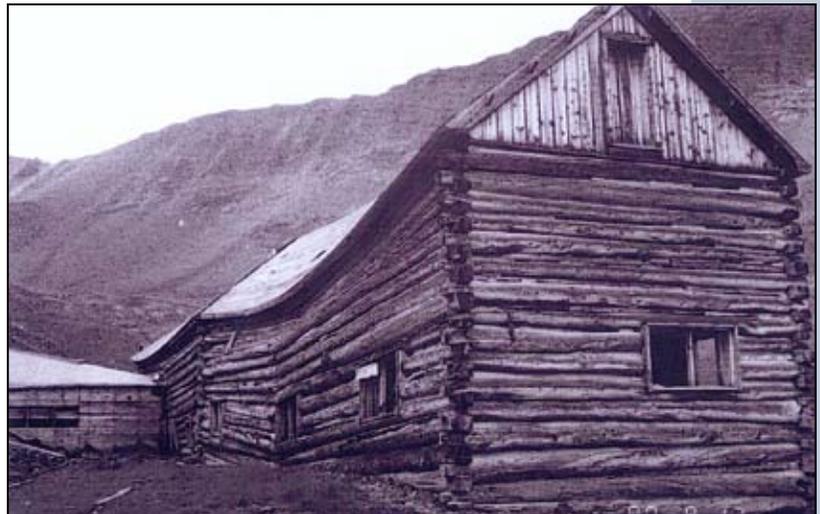


The BLM Gunnison Field Office also invites you to explore the Alpine Loop and help us celebrate the Antiquities Act Centennial on Saturday, September 16, 2006. Interpretative stops along the way will offer visitors insight into the history of the area. History buffs will be available at key historic sites along the way to explain the area's rich mining history on the entire Alpine Loop.

Whether you join us for this event or explore the area on your own, the BLM asks that visitors please follow these principles when visiting historic and prehistoric sites:

- Leave artifacts where you find them. It is still illegal to dig, remove or collect artifacts without a permit. Take photographs, not artifacts.
- Avoid moving or climbing on the walls of historic and prehistoric structures when touring sites.
- Treat rock art, historic structures and archaeological features with respect.
- Stay on existing roads and trails.
- For campfires, collect only dead or downed wood that is clearly not from historic or prehistoric sites. Collect wood and build fires at least 200 yards away from heritage sites.
- Educate others to never dig at sites, or collect artifacts or vertebrate fossils.
- If there are no trash receptacles, take all of your trash with you. Remember: pack it in, pack it out.
- Report looting and vandalism to a BLM ranger, the nearest BLM field office, or local law enforcement.

Remember to preserve America's cultural heritage for future generations to enjoy—it is fragile and irreplaceable. And finally, remember that abandoned mines are dangerous. Just because you see an open shaft, tunnel or adit **does not** mean it is safe to go inside. Unseen holes, falling rocks and support timbers, unstable soils and toxic gasses are only some of the things that can harm you. Stay out and stay alive!



Golconda boarding house prior to stabilization efforts.